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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS, EUR/ERA, EUR/SE AND INR/EU

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIA: LEADERS EXPRESS SKEPTICISM ABOUT
TURKISH EU MEMBERSHIP - BUT NO PLANS TO BLOCK TALKS

This message is sensitive but unclassified.

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Austria's political establishment is underlining its deep skepticism of Turkish EU membership. First, Chancellor Schuessel (conservative People's Party - OVP) reiterated the position he took at the December 2004 EU summit: that the EU should conduct "open-ended" negotiations with Turkey. Social Democratic leader Gusenbauer struck a similar chord. Parliamentary President Khol and Finance Minister Grasser recently expressed reservations about Turkish membership. However, Foreign Minister Plassnik confirmed on June 13 that Austria continued to support opening negotiations with Turkey on October 3. End summary.

2. (SBU) In the wake of the French and Dutch votes against the EU constitutional treaty, Austrian leaders appear to have achieved an unusual degree of consensus regarding Turkey's EU aspirations. Views run a narrow gamut from frank skepticism to outright rejection of Turkish EU membership. SPO leader Alfred Gusenbauer said on June 4 that the EU should not expand further until it has a constitution. The right-wing Freedom Party has been stridently against Turkish EU membership, and is expected to make this a campaign issue in state elections this fall. Among Austria's parties, only the Greens have been consistently favorable to Turkey joining the EU.

3. (SBU) In a June 4 interview, Chancellor Schuessel reiterated Austria's position at the December 2004 summit: that the EU should conduct "open-ended" negotiations with Turkey. Schuessel noted that at the time he had been rather isolated in this stance -- but no longer. Schuessel also recalled his suggestion that in the event of a concrete accession offer to Turkey, Austria should hold a referendum on Turkish entry.

4. (SBU) The Austrian press prominently reported a recent statement by EU External Relations Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner (who is from Schuessel's OVP) to the effect that EU expansion should slow down to allow EU citizens time to digest the most recent enlargement round. However, on June 13 Ferrero-Waldner issued a partial retraction, saying she had not intended to call into question the October 3 start date for negotiations.

5. (SBU) Parliamentary President Andreas Khol (OVP) expressed similar reservations in an interview with the news weekly "PROFIL" that appeared on June 11. Khol said Turkish membership was not realistic within the next 15 or 20 years. Khol said the EU Commission bore responsibility for pronouncing Turkey "fit for Europe," although the general population in Europe did not share this view.

6. (SBU) In a June 12 meet-the-press TV appearance, Finance Minister Karl-Heinz Grasser (independent) made no secret of his opposition to Turkish entry: "I am against

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accession negotiations with Turkey," Grasser said, adding that Turkey was "not qualified for membership." Turkish accession would "overstrain" the EU, he added.

7. (SBU) Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, speaking on the margins of the June 13 meeting of foreign ministers in Luxembourg, quickly distanced herself from her colleague's comments. She said Grasser had made his views known when the cabinet discussed Turkish accession, but that the GoA had decided to back the opening of talks. She saw no reason for Austria to change its position. Plassnik stressed that October 3 was the beginning of "open-ended" negotiations with Turkey with "a multitude of reactive options on the part of the EU."

8. (SBU) COMMENT: With skepticism about the pace of EU expansion spreading in European capitals following the French and Dutch "no" votes on the constitution, Austrians feel vindicated about the critical stance they have taken all along regarding Turkish EU membership.

Leaders of nearly all stripes are now making an explicit connection between the difficulties encountered in ratifying the constitutional treaty and enlargement, especially Turkey's accession. Austrian statements for domestic consumption will likely continue to diverge somewhat from GoA positions taken within EU fora. This does not mean, however, that Austria will try to derail the October start for accession negotiations.

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